

# THE SACRIFICE

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THE cell was small, about twenty feet in diameter, hexagonal in shape, cold and dark damp. There was no furniture but a few wooden stools for the guards, and a bed that was nothing more than a hay-filled mat atop a rough wooden pallet. There were two narrow slits in the wall, for ventilation only; they let in no light. He had been told of this, and had brought a large taper from his own stores. Made of fine beeswax, not spluttering tallow, it burned with a peculiar soft brightness, as it would have on the high altar for which it had been made. Now it showed him not the gold plate and jeweled vessels of the mass, but the prisoner. A girl in men's clothing. She was nineteen years, four months, and twenty-two days old.

Henry Beaufort gestured the guards out of the cell with one gloved hand. "Think you that a girl chained as she is, she can do us any harm?" he asked the one who frowned an objection. "Leave us."

"Yes, your grace." The guard was not happy about it, nor were the others, but one did not dare gainsay the Cardinal of England and a son of a Royal Duke to boot.

The door clanked closed. He turned his gaze upon the prisoner, who sat up on her bed.

"I would rise, your grace, and beg to make my respects, but as you see—" She shrugged and her chains rattled. It was obvious she could not stand.

"*De rien, ma fille,*" he murmured. It was of no consequence. He had more important things to do than allow his ring to be kissed. Before he could say what he had come to do, however, she spoke again, eagerly.

"Please, your grace, have you come to hear my confession? Have you come to celebrate mass for me?"

Leaving aside the absurdity of a Prince of the Church saying the Holy Office for an illiterate French peasant girl, it amused him to find her so continually single-minded. She asked for this again and again and again, and was always denied it. She must know she would be denied now. So he ignored the questions and said instead, "There have been no more incidents, I trust."

"Incidents?" She looked puzzled.

"The guards," he explained gently. Three of them had attacked her in an attempt at rape, but she had fought them off so strenuously that they would have scars for life—and it would take a long while for clumps of their hair and beards to grow back. Their chagrin would change to pride soon enough, Beaufort knew, and the scars become battle-honored because of who had given them. "They have left you alone?"

Incredibly, she blushed. "Y-yes, your grace."

"*Ires bien.* My lord of Warwick gave specific instructions."

"Not because of any tenderness for me, I think," she replied with a shrewd glance. "He

wants a living head to chop off at the neck."

"I am pleased to find you so perceptive." Odd to think that she could still believe she would escape the fire.

Quite unexpectedly, she said, "You speak French well, for a goddam."

Amused again by her use of the nickname for Englishmen, he almost smiled. "I am half French, in truth. My mother was a very beautiful woman from Picardy. Very beautiful," he repeated softly. "Even her tomb mentions how lovely she was. I used to watch the courtiers stare at her—even in the later years, when she was fifty and more, when she was older than I am now." He paused, studying her. "She had power over men. So do you. Yet you're not even pretty."

"No, your grace," she replied quite seriously.

He watched her eyes for a moment—large, fine eyes, remarkable in their clarity and the only claim she had to beauty—then said abruptly, "I have noted that during your trial you spoke of preferring to have your head cut off rather than say something you had no permission to say. Why is that, Joan? You know what the penalty is for heretics: fire. Ah, you see? You blanched even now at the mention of it. It is not death you fear, but the manner of your death. You all invite your judges to slice off your head, yet the very word 'fire' makes you start like a doe. You are afraid—nay, terrified—of the fire. Why?" Without giving her time to answer he continued, "Is it because the fire will burn you to ashes, and there will be no blood? Blood must be spoiled, mustn't it, for the sacrifice to be complete."

"Sacrifice, your grace?"

She was brilliant, he reflected, at imitating innocence. "I am a learned man, Joan. I have read and studied since my earliest youth, for that seemed to me to be the only way I could make something of myself in a world that despises bastards—especially royal ones. Having no talent for the sword, not being a man of my hands as my brother John of Somerset was—may God assoil him—I decided I must use my brain. And I have used it well, Joan. I counsel the Holy Father. I have been Chancellor of England—and will be again, I daresay, despite my cousin of Gloucester."

He stopped then, arched a brow at her, and almost smiled. "I know where you come from," he continued softly. "Lorraine, out of which no good can come—as the saying has it. A country rife with witches. I know of your fountain and your faerie tree—the Charmed Tree of the Faerie of Bourlement, where nearby there is an enchanted spring. I know that your mother had dealings with—"

"That is not true!" she cried. "We are good Christian folk! I, too, know what is said of home, and what the superstitions are, but I do not believe them!"

"And *I* do not believe *you*," he told her. "Unlearned and untaught as you are, did you know of the prophecies? Years ago Marie Robine foresaw a maid in armor, and even Merlin, who had much to prophecy about my own house, told of a virgin from the forests of Lorraine who would come to the aid of France. Have you listened to such things, Joan, and decided to use them to your own ends?"

"No!"

"I do not believe you," he said again, still very gently. "How else but by magical arts could you have known about the sword buried beneath the altar at St. Catherine-de-Fierbois?"

The frown cleared from her face; evidently mention of some specific thing, something real as the sword, gave her ground to stand upon.

"It was God's Will that I find and bear that sword—"

"—God's Will as told to you by your Voices? Or by faerie spirits?"

"It was St. Michael, and St. Catherine, and St. Margaret—"

"My mother's name was Catherine," he commented almost idly.

"*En nom Dieu!*" she exclaimed. "Is it your mother about to die?"

"Perhaps she burns even now, with my father," he mused. "They sinned, you know. As have I. As have I. . . ." He looked straight at her, then away. "My daughter, also named Joan, only a little older than you."

"Your grace, what has this to do—"

"*Passez outre,*" he interrupted, mocking her with her own phrase repeated so many times during her trial. "Shall I tell you why not one drop of your blood will spill on French soil? Shall I tell you, Joan, why you will burn?"

She paled again, and her chains rattled faintly, as if she shivered. "I—I am tired, your grace, I would sleep, by your leave."

"Soon you will sleep for all eternity. You will die, Joan. Unconfessed, unshriven, and unassoiled by God and His Saints. What is more, you will have failed the pathetic lackwit to call your king. Shall I tell you how you will fail?"

"May I not Confess, your grace, and be Absolved, and hear Mass before I die? I beg it of you, please!"

He started to answer negatively, then considered. "If you do as you have been told—"

"I will not put on women's garments," she warned, "and I will not lie and say my Voices are not from God."

*Stubborn,* he thought. Then: *But why not? Eh bien, perhaps I should allow her to hear Mass after all. This blood sacrifice is a pagan thing, and if she is meant to be what I think they mean her to be, would not receiving the Body and Blood of Christ make her unacceptable?*

"You have at least the virtue of consistency," he replied at last. "But, come, allow me to explain your life to you—and your death."

Learned as he was, he could not quite fathom his own purpose for telling her of his deductions and inferences, of his research and his reasoning. Perhaps it was because to speak of such things finally, and to their subject, would be a relief to his mind. Especially after so many months of enduring that *canaille* Cauchon. He did not understand himself in this matter, but he spoke to her anyway.

"Prophecy has it that you will save France. In my country, our king is England. Thus, to save France, you must save your king. And to do this you must die. Bloodily."

"Your grace?" Bewilderment again. *Bon Dieu*, she did it well.

"Silence," he said. "I will come to that in a moment. Nowhere is it written or sung—"

"I'm sorry, your grace—'sung?' I don't underst—"

"I ask you to be silent, *ma fille*. The ancient bards have much to teach us—and I enjoy music for more than its pleasing sound. No song or story tells of a woman taking a man's place of a woman taking a *king's* place. Thus you have abandoned women's ways and garb. You walk like a man, war like a man, wield a sword like a man—"

"I never killed! Never!"

"Should there be any further interruptions, Joan, I will gag you with my own glove. When I wish you to speak, I will ask you a question. Is that understood?"

"Y-yes, your grace."

"To continue. You have scorned all that a woman ought rightly to do, refusing even to consider marriage when most girls your age are already mothers. What could this imposture be but an attempt to make yourself into a man?"

"As for your Voices—let us examine their identities. St. Michael the warrior Archangel, champion of God's people—surely he is no fit saint for a woman to revere as her patron."

Sparks of defiance lit her eyes, and for a moment he thought she would protest that she could not help who had spoken to her. But her lips stayed stubbornly closed. He admired her self-control.

"Then there is St. Margaret, Virgin and Martyr—they attempted to burn her, yet the flames left her untouched. A cauldron of boiling water was similarly useless. Finally, she was beheaded. Do you consider yourself worthy of a saint's death such as hers? And lastly you claim St. Catherine, also Virgin, also Martyr—condemned to die on the wheel, which at her touch was miraculously destroyed. My mother's name was Catherine. No virgin, she, and no martyr. I have something that belonged to her, I carry it always with me."

And from the folds of his scarlet robes he brought out a small leather purse, soft with a stippled here and there with the remains of gold tooling. From the purse he drew a ring; it had not belonged to his mother.

"That is mine!" the girl cried. "My parents gave it me!"

"Do you see the Catherine wheels here on this purse, in gold? Is this what you wish, Joan? Anything but the fire?"

"Give me back my ring!"

"Let us not forget that in the end, St. Catherine's head was cut off, and her blood flowed"

"Please, your grace—"

"Would you rather have it than your sword?"

"My sword is broken," she whispered, bending her head.

"Yes. I had heard that. An ancient sword, found in a chapel built by Charles Martel. How did you know it was there? Not, I think, because any person living told you. It was the Voices, was it not, the Voices you claim to be those of saints, who have told you things you should have known." He ticked off the points on his fingers—long, elegant fingers, like his mother's. "You knew that Sir John Fastolf had defeated the French at Rouvray. You knew you would be captured before Midsummer's Day. You knew you would be wounded at Orleans, not unto death. You knew where the sword would be hidden. And, most amazing of all—you have heard reports of the Dauphin and he is a poor excuse for a prince—you recognized Charles at once in a roomful of people determined not to reveal his identity. But above all you knew you will surely die. You told the Dauphin so, did you not? That he must make the most of you, for you would only last one year?"

"Yes," she said dully. "I told him that. It seemed such a long time, then. . . ."

"You survived that which you should not have survived," he went on, replacing the ring in the leather pouch. "Your wound at Orleans. Your wound at Paris. How is this possible?"

"St. Catherine cured me of the wound I took at Orleans."

"And in less than a fortnight, too," he agreed. "Remarkable, yes? And the wound taken at Paris—five days to cure that one, wasn't it? Miraculous, most would say."

"But—you do not say it, Cardinal."

"No, I do not. You survived a leap from Beaurevoir Tower, a structure fully seventy feet high. How?"

"It was very wrong of me to do that," she said earnestly, looking him in the eye once again. "St. Catherine told me almost every day that I should not do it, and that God would help me. Her jaw set, and her fine eyes sparked once more. "But I would rather have died than fall in the hands of the English!"

"Why? Because you knew you would burn, with no blood spilled?"

"Blood! Blood!" she exclaimed, exasperated, as if she truly did not know what he meant. "Why do you speak always of blood?"

"Do you remember what day it was that the Dauphin was absurdly crowned in the cathedral at Rheims? Of course you do. Sunday, the seventeenth day of July. There was a full moon that morning." When she looked blank, he snapped, "It was not God who consecrated Charles, but the devil. Your so-called king was ordained by witchcraft, not Holy Scripture."

She looked horrified, and crossed herself. But then the peasant shrewdness returned to her face, and she said, "You have made a study of such things, your grace. You know more about them than ever I did and ever I could. May I ask 'why' of *you*?"

"You dissemble, Joan. You were born in a land of witches, of faerie trees and fountains of secret rituals and foul heresies. Your actions have betrayed you. I shall give but one example. When you put your armor in the church at St. Denis, you caused candles to be lighted and said that the melted wax from these candles should fall on the heads of little children, so that they would know happiness." He eyed her disdainfully. "Did you dare ask for black candles, Joan, or was that going too far?"

"That is not true! I have denied that! I never did or said such things!"

"Witnesses say that you did. And you continually assert that all you have done was by command of God, speaking to you through your Voices! *Alors, ma fille*, as to the nature of the Voices . . . why should saints appear to such as you? Ignorant, unlettered, uneducated, of the commonest common blood—what smallest thing about you is worthy to receive the notice of such holy beings? My answer is this: that these Voices were not saints at all, but manifestations of Satan and his minions, and that you are the tool of a false religion."

"I am not!" she cried. "*Nom Dieu*, I swear that all I have done—"

"But we have not yet explored the meaning of these things," he said, as calm as she was agitated. "I will educate you. Long ago, my ancestor, the great William, Duke of Normandy, claimed England as his right. And the blood of Harald the usurper spilled onto the ground from an arrow through his eye. Years later, William's son, also a king, died—also arrow-shot. They say he bled for miles as they carried him home in a cart. Another king, for whom I am named, ordered that an archbishop be slain most bloodily—though they say he was careful with his words on the subject, was that Henry. A hundred years ago the Scot Wallace was hanged by the neck, cut down whilst still living, and his bloody entrails drawn out of his body as he watched—and The Bruce had his kingship. The father of my grandfather, also a king, was killed as well—but without a mark upon his body, without a drop of blood. So someone else must naturally be sacrificed in his stead so that his son, the third Edward—"

"Your grace," she interrupted impatiently, "I do not understand this talk of blood and sacrifices. What has this to do with me?"

"*You* are the sacrifice." There, he had said it plain at last, this thing he feared. Not a sign of his turmoil showed outwardly; fifty and more years as a Plantagenet bastard had taught him facial discretion first of all.

Yet her eyes—she saw something, he knew it. Settling himself, he went on, "Why else do you fear the fire so? Your blood must touch the soil of France for your death to have any meaning. That is the ancient belief, is it not? *Alors*, why am I asking you, who have known this time? You, who used the prophecies and have the powers of a witch—do you know the one I called my mother that? Even my own father, or so the chroniclers would have it, named her a witch and whore—though I never believed it of him, he loved her too long and too well—"

Very suddenly—as if God's golden finger touched her—the candle in his hand illumined the peasant girl, and she became beautiful. "I see," she breathed. "Oh, yes, now I see."

"See what?" he jeered. "Your so-called saints? Perhaps God Himself?"

"Only the truth, my lord. And it is all so simple."

"Explain yourself, girl!"

"It is only this: Why me, and not you?" Sitting straight up on her cot, eagerness lighting her plain face, she nearly laughed aloud. "Oh, do you not see it? You have everything—lands, titles, wealth, royal blood, power and influence, fame—all but that which you want most." She leaned forward, her hands clasped together, her eyes shining. "What you lack is the certainty of God. You do not think yourself worthy in His Eyes—and you a Cardinal of His Church!"

"No more. I will hear no more."

She spoke on, enraptured with her own understanding. "Only have faith, your grace. I do not know why I was chosen. I said during my trial that if those who asked for the signs and not receive them were not worthy of them, then I could not help it. It is not for you or me to decide, your grace. Do you think I asked for my Voices? I was but thirteen when first I heard them, and for three years I tried with all my might *not* to hear them. I do not know why they chose me and not you. I am sorry for you, and I wish with all my heart that you could know the joy I have known."

She dared pity him? *Him?*

"But now it appears that I shall die for my king and for France. God has not deserted me. I am content."

"You *will die*," he rasped, breathing with difficulty, and it took every bit of courage he possessed to meet her translucent gaze. "You will burn until there is nothing left of you but gray ash. There will be no blood sacrifice. Your death will go un-consecrated by any power ever known."

He went to the door and called for the guard, then turned back to face her where she sat on her cot—so serene, so certain. "France will become what it was ever meant to be: a province of England, as in the days of Henry FitzEmpress and Eleanor d'Aquitaine. Your worthless Dauphin Charles will never rule here, never. You will fail of your purpose, and fail your failure of a king."

She appeared unmoved. Her voice was soft, compassionate, as she asked, "Had you thought, your grace, that although God has sent me here, to this time and this place, to do this thing for France, perhaps He has also sent *you* here to be the means of my death?"

"Thank me for it," he snapped, "when the flames char the flesh from your bones. And he left her alone with her Voices."

Well before dawn the next morning—he slept not at all that night—the Cardinal of England summoned a certain man to his apartments.

"Take heed, my son. She is to be burned. Completely and utterly annihilated by fire. Not one drop of her blood shall touch the soil of France. Do you understand us?"

"Yes, m'lord—I mean, y'r grace—y'r worship—"

"Enough. It is enough that you understand. Leave us. Do your work well, and God shall reward you."

A little while later he was looking out upon the square of St. Ouen. Platforms were on either side of the south door of the church; the Bishop of Beauvais and the rest of the clergy occupied one, and the girl stood on the other. Within the cemetery there was ample space for a large crowd to collect on the gently sloping ground facing the south door of the church. There would be plenty of witnesses: noble ones to attest the truth to kings and princes; clerical or

to swear to the Church; common ones to spread word among the people. There would be no mystery here, no magic.

The herald named him for the crowd. He could hear the capital letters.

"The Most Reverend Father in Christ, Henry, by Divine Permission Priest of the Holy Roman Church, the Cardinal of England."

He slipped a hand into a pocket of his robes, closing his fingers around the purse that had been his mother's, containing the ring that had been the girl's. Cauchon had given the ring to him. He would give it to his daughter when he returned to England—and suddenly he longed for England with all his soul.

The Maid was looking at him—he could swear she was staring him straight in the eyes. She called out in a rough, ringing voice, "I ask you, priests of God, to please say a mass for my soul's salvation—"

Cauchon muttered angrily.

"May I have a crucifix, please? Please—on a level with my eyes, so that I may see it—"

Someone—he would never know who—held up a plain wooden crosier, with the Suffering Christ carved on it by a crude and awkward hand. Thus had the greatest King of France died, his blood spilling on the earth. Hers must not.

The faggots were heaped above her knees now. By rights the crowd ought to have been cheering. Oddly enough, he could hear nothing but the quiet measured beat of his own heart. He felt calm, patient, as if waiting for he knew not what—not the smoke and the flames and the stench of seared flesh, but something else. It was the sort of interior stillness he experienced sometimes just before Communion. Just before the miracle and the magic of the wine and bread becoming the Blood and Body of Christ. He heard nothing at those times, and he heard nothing now. He'd always thought that perhaps God stopped up his ears for that little while so that his servant might hear His Words more clearly.

But God had never spoken to him.

She was speaking again, proud and defiant. "My Voices *did* come from God, and everything I have done was by God's order!"

"Silence her!" Cauchon hissed.

It was then that he realized he did not hear the bishop the way he had heard the girl. He had seen the man's lips move, and knew what words he spoke. But he truly heard only Joan.

Or perhaps God, speaking in Joan's voice.

He stared at the small plain face, the short sturdy frame, the hair shaved now where it had been worn in a man's style just above her ears, and to him she appeared well-nigh sexless. Male by appearance and clothing, male in warlike habit—but also female, assuming the guile and greatness of a warrior over the small soft breasts and gently curved hips of a woman. She ought to have borne babies, not arms. But even though he knew her to be female, still with her man's clothes and her unflinching gaze as the pyre was lit, she was to him neither woman nor man.



But certainly more of a man than that puling fool she had seen crowned King of France

*You do not deserve her, Charles, he thought. And you will not have her, not as you and she intended. There will be no blood to seep into French soil. There will be no Sacrifice.*

He could hear again, but only the hiss and crackle of the flames. She was still staring at him. Nearby, Cauchon leaned eagerly forward, avid as a scavenging crow for carrion. White smoke began to rise, obscuring her from view. He heard her cry out to God.

Smoke draped the roof and walls of the church like white wedding garments. But the smell of the marriage feast was the stink of her own scorched flesh.

At length, she was nothing but ash. He left the platform with his fellow priests, wondering if any of them would heed her final request and say a mass for her soul.

As he walked from the square, he heard them. The voices.

"Did you see it? In the flames—"

"Writ with fire!"

"The name of Jesus, right above her head—"

"And the dove, did you see the dove fly from the pyre?"

"A saint, they have murdered a saint—"

He steeled his jaw and strode away.

He was writing to his daughter, inquiring about the health of his grandson and namesake when Bedford burst into his apartments.

"You haven't heard?" demanded the duke. "That stupid, *stupid* man! He ruined everything. We'll never be rid of her now!"

"Calm yourself, nephew," he said. This man was his least-favorite relation but for that colossal moron, Gloucester. Bedford invariably ground his teeth when reminded of their kinship—but never dared insult him to his face. Not the Cardinal of England. "I recognize the 'her' of this, for we have been solely concerned with the wretched girl for a very long time. Who is the 'he'?"

"The executioner, that's who!" Bedford flung himself onto the crimson cushions padding the window embrasure, but was just as quickly up again and pacing. "He tried and tried, but he couldn't burn either her heart or her guts! So do you know what he did with them? Threw them into the Seine, that's what!"

Leaning back in his chair, he rested his gaze on his daughter's name—rendered in the French spelling, in his precise cleric's hand, on the finest parchment. *Jehanne*. But it was not his daughter's sweet face he saw, a face so like his long-dead mother's that sometimes his breath caught in his throat on seeing her smile. It was the earnest, unlovely face of a different *Jehanne* that rose up before him.

*Her heart bled into the Seine, the great Mother of Waters that bleeds into the soil. From Normandy to Bourgogne her heart blood will mix with the lifeblood of France.*

"Her heart! Her guts!" The duke's voice intruded. "By Our Lady, what parts of her could you have picked to better effect? To put heart and guts into the French army and the French king—that's what they'll say when they find out!" Bedford made a few more circuits of the room, then spun round and spat, "Well? What have you to say to this, *Uncle?*"

Beaufort regarded his kinsman with concealed loathing. *Your father, my half brother and late king, would be nauseated by you. You are an idiot and a fool, and a disgrace to the royal blood we share. And you will fail, Nephew, because of what you are. I am neither an idiot nor a fool—yet my failure has been the greater. And my failure has come about because of God, Who allowed her blood to spill as His Son's was spilt. Were it mere symbolism as Bedford believes, still it is the most powerful symbol in the world. Does it mark me heretic, to believe it is more than that?*

"I say," Beaufort murmured, "that dead is dead, and let that end it."

But what he was thinking was, *I say that we had best resign ourselves to a brief and unhappy rule over France. For now she has a true king, crowned and blooded, with the Sacrifice duly made—and there is nothing we can do to change it.*

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Note: Although Cardinal Beaufort's visit to Joan of Arc is of the author's imagination, the details of the prophecies and the events of her life and death are accurate. (She did find the sword at St. Catherine-de-Fierbois; the executioner did find it impossible to burn Joan's heart and entrails, and so threw them into the Seine.) Many years later, Joan's mother appealed to the Vatican to reopen the case, and Joan was exonerated. Canonized in 1920, she is the patron Saint of France.

Beaufort's parents were Katherine de Roet and John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, son of Edward III. Katherine was John's mistress for many years before a parting of the ways, at which time (according to contemporary chroniclers) he denounced her as a witch. They married in 1397 at Lincoln Cathedral; their four children were legitimated by the Pope and recognized by Richard II. This was the origin of the Wars of the Lancastrian and Yorkist Roses that ended at Bosworth Field in 1485 with the victory of Henry Tudor—a descendant of Katherine de Roet and John of Gaunt through Cardinal Beaufort's brother John, Earl of Somerset.